

IDOLATRY

Domenic Marbaniang

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INTRODUCTION

‘Idolatry’ may be defined as the practice of worshipping and serving images (pictures, sculpts, etc) as identical with, as representative of, or as deity. In almost every major religion, idolatrous misrepresentation of God has been denounced at some point or the other by religious reformers. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are blatantly against idolatry. Though Roman Catholicism practices reverence to icons, such practice is nowhere endorsed in the Bible, even in a limited form. Sikhism also believes that God is formless and rejects idol worship. Hindu reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Swami Dayananda Saraswati spoke against idolatry. From the Biblical point of view, idolatry is symbolical of rebellion against God and indulgence in the world of passions (Rom. 1: 18-25).

I. SINFULNESS OF IDOLATRY

A. The Commandment

The second commandment of the Decalogue demands: ‘Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness *of any thing* that *is* in heaven above, or that *is* in the earth beneath, or that *is* in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for the LORD thy God *am* a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth *generation* of them that hate me; and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.’ (Ex. 20:4-6).

Note: making images, here, specifically refers to making images of God with religious purposes (Lev. 26:1).

1. ‘*Thou shalt not*’ – ‘I shall make’ demonstrates **rebellion**. It shows **disrespect** for the divine person. It **dishonors** the divine command and **disavows** God Himself. (Rom. 1:18-21)
2. ‘*make...graven image, or any likeness...*’ – breaking this command displays the **disorientation** and **ill-directioning** (not merely mis-directioning, as if mistake) of worship. It displays **degeneration** of theology and **self-interpretation** of cosmos, in other words the **jettisoning** of divine revelation (the suppression of truth, Rom. 1:18). It displays **manufacture** of a lie, the **substitution** of reality, the **replacement** thereof with **self-created** virtuality. (Isa. 42:8; 46:5).
3. ‘*of any thing that is in heaven...earth...water.*’ – idolatry is **delimitation** of God, **misrepresentation** of the Godhead, **corruption** of religion, and **destruction** of the transcendental. It ends up in the **disavowal** of absolutes and **materialization** or **secularization** of spirituality. The image itself displays the **impersonalization** and **passivitization** of God, in other words, God is rendered dumb, deaf, and

powerless and left to the wistful, fanciful, imagination of the idolater.(Ps.115:4-8).

4. 'Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them' – 'bowing down' displays **submission to** the idol, implying a **categorical departure from** the Biblical God. 'Serving' implies **self-giving, abandoning, enslavement to** the idol or idolatrous system.

B. Explanation

1. God is Spirit. Worship, therefore, specified Jesus, must be spiritual and true (Jn. 4:24). Making idols is **de-spiritualization** of the Godhead, **suppression** of truth (Rom. 1:18, 21), and **invention** of lie (Rev. 21: 27). Remember God is not a spirit like angelic beings or the spirit of a man. God is *wholly different* from all created beings and things. Therefore, no created (non-divine) object can represent His form. The physical idol alienates the idolater from the true God (Eze. 14: 5).

Question: Dishonor of pictures or symbols are considered wrong. For instance, dishonor of the Indian Flag is considered dishonor of the nation. Likewise, doesn't dishonor of any image thought to represent God constitute dishonor of God Himself?

Answer: I consider a pig to be a beautiful animal. However, if anyone made a picture of me like a pig, I would consider **that** to be misrepresenting, if not dishonoring, me. If, however, he says that he knows me only as a pig then, in reality, he doesn't know me and that picture is not mine and his labeling of it as me is dishonoring me. On the other hand, if he claims that he doesn't know how I look and, therefore, has made a picture of me like a pig; then, he has no right to make a picture of what he doesn't know for that would constitute fabrication of falsehood; and that picture would only distort the truth of what I am. In reality, then, an idol (whatever people say it is) is neither God nor can it be His representation.

Question: If I had a photograph of Jesus or a painting of Him, can I worship it?

Answer: Worship of images involves **substitution** of the true object of worship, God, with an invention or self-decided representation of it. Therefore, worship of any images, including those of Christ (even if they are original photographs!) is sinful (missing the mark and falling short of God's true glory). To put it simple, that picture is **not** Jesus; therefore, worship of it doesn't mean or imply worship of Jesus. For instance, eating the picture or clay model of an apple doesn't mean one has eaten an apple.

Note: The worship of Jesus the son of God is based on His divinity and not His humanity. We worship Him because He is God and not because He is man. Jesus is the bodily indwelling of the Godhead, the true Temple of God (Col. 2:9; Jn. 2:19). Therefore, He is worshipped. His image, however, is not indwelt by the fullness of Godhead neither is it a temple of God.

2. God is Infinite (*immense* - 1 Kgs. 8:27; *eternal* - Ex.15:18; Dt. 33:27). Therefore, limiting Him to an image in space-time is distortion of His true nature. God must be

worshipped as the infinite, unlimited God. Limiting God by any means or form is symbolic of unbelief in the true nature and power of God (Ps. 78: 41). Picturing Him in the form of some limited creature is departure from faith in God as infinite in being and power.

C. Dimensions of Idolatrous Sin

1. Subjective (Internal). Idolatry is primarily internal. There are idols in the human heart that take the place of God (Eze. 14: 3) and must be removed because God desires truth in the inward being (Ps. 51: 6). The idols of the heart are anything that distort the truth of God or replace Him.

2. Objective (External). Objective idols are of two kinds: those that are religiously defined (idols of deities, 1 Cor. 10: 19, 20) and those that are socially defined (money, pleasure, power, 1 Cor. 10: 7, 8).

III. DIVINE RESPONSE

1. Repent and turn from idols (Eze. 14:6). God calls all men (His children, Acts 17: 28, 29) out of enslavement to idols. The idols cannot and do not hold the people captive. It is the people who blindly and willingly give themselves over to **both internal and external** idols. Therefore, repentance or turning of the mind, will, and emotion from idols (since traditional bonds are involved) is necessary.

2. Flee from idolatry (1 Cor. 10: 14). This command is with respect to one's attitude towards idolatry. A child of God is to flee idols not because he fears the idols will do something (1 Cor. 10:19), but because he abhors and hates any falsehood that stands against the true nature of God (1 Cor. 10:21). The child of God must flee from any partaking or fellowship with idolatrous worship. (1 Cor. 10:20). He must come out of idolatrous relationships and separate himself for God (2 Cor. 6: 17).

3. Idol worship will be completely destroyed. In the Final Judgment, idolatry will be judged (Rev. 21: 8; 22:15). Idols will be totally removed (Isa. 2:18). False worship will be abolished and the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord (Isa. 11:9; Hab. 2:14).

PRACTICAL QUESTIONS

1. If I'm given food offered to idols can I eat it?

Answer: If one doesn't know that it was of such kind and eats it, it is not sin (1 Cor. 10: 27). However, one must not eat it if one knows it is offered to an idol. There are at least three reasons behind this injunction in the New Testament.

1. That food connotes fellowship with that religious system which is denial of relationship with Christ (1 Cor. 10:20, 21). The food in itself and by itself has no magical or evil influence: 'the earth is the Lord's.'

2. A Christian must not eat it for his own conscience's sake (1 Cor. 10: 28-30). There are many things which are morally not wrong but still are spiritually inexpedient (1 Cor. 10: 23). The conscience gets polluted when one denies absolute allegiance to the Lord and avoids testifying of Him for personal, social, political or any other reason. It also gets polluted when love of self-security and respect is placed above love of God.
3. A Christian must not eat it for the sake of others' conscience (1 Cor. 10: 28-30). The weaker Christians must be governed by many laws, like children in a home before they are able to learn responsibility and make mature decisions. Such Christians may get easily ensnared into idolatry when they see stronger Christians harmless partaking of such food. Therefore, for the sake of their conscience, such food must be avoided.

2. Will I be destroying my social relations by not partaking of food offered to idols?

Answer: No, it is only by despisal of and insult of others religions that one harms social relations. A Christian by not partaking of such food is not insulting someone else's religion but is simply exercising freedom of conscience. For instance, a strong Christian may eat goat meat and feel nothing wrong about it in his conscience. On the contrary, a strong Brahmin will not eat meat since it is against the rule of his conscience. A Christian and a Brahmin can be good friends as long as they respect each other's conscience. The problem comes when the Christian tries to despise the Brahmin for not eating meat with him.

3. How does a government servant respond to religious contexts?

In a secular nation such as India, one must remember that state and religion are separate. Religion is a private and individual issue. Therefore, religious practices of any particular religion cannot be enforced in any governmental context. As far as invitations as guest to religious meetings and gatherings is concerned, the government servant may go there but is not obliged to participate in the rituals thereof. All this should be clarified before accepting the invitation.

CONCLUSION

Idolatry is sin because it involves departure from God towards creation, a self-definition of the Godhead along one's own drives and passions. It is corruption and rejection of divine revelation. Therefore, the God who reveals Himself as the one and true God abhors idolatry. However, idolatry is not just something that involves idols of paint, clay, stone, and metal. Idolatry may be something deep within someone's heart. A Christian must, therefore, regularly check his heart and if there is anything other than truth and integrity therein, he must cast it out of his heart and fill the empty space with worship and reverence of the only true God (Ps. 139:23,24).